

Navigating the Psychological Sense of Safety in the Face of Military Conflict: A Case of Palestinians Living in the Gaza Strip

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Abstract

The study examined the psychological sense of safety among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip amidst the ongoing military conflict pitting Israel and Hamas, a militant Palestinian political organisation. Using documentary analysis, the researcher found that the distress from war significantly disrupts children's psychological and emotional development, affecting their self-concept and relationships. The findings highlight a critical need for safety, freedom from violence, and the restoration of civil society to help individuals rebuild their lives. Children and women are particularly vulnerable, suffering greatly in violent circumstances. Additionally, worsening socio-economic conditions further exacerbate the psychological challenges faced by the Palestinians in Gaza Strip. The practical implications emphasise the urgent need for interventions that address these psychological and social issues to support recovery and future resilience.

Keywords: Gaza Strip, war, trauma, distress, bombardment, torture.

Introduction

Exposure to life threatening events such as war contributes to pervasive mental health challenges due to safety concerns, loss of loved ones and disruption of daily life. In a related study conducted by the World Bank (2022), 71% of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip who were screened met the criteria for severe depression. The depression was attributed to exposure to restrictions on movements and the military conflict between Israel and Hamas. Similar studies by Rance (2020) showed that 100% of children aged 11 to 17 years had PTSD due to exposure to the military conflict between Hamas militants and the Israeli forces. The children had experienced horrific experiences of their parents and siblings being subjected to inhuman treatment such as torture, detention, home demolitions, and loss of first-grade relatives and even fear of losing their own lives.

According to Alwhidi (2023), Kamal Adwan Hospital's maternity unit was bombed by the Israeli army killing several patients. Pregnant women and babies were among the deceased. Ghebreyesus (2023), the Director-General of the World Health Organisation, gave a horrific description of the state of hospitals in the Gaza Strip. The people were treated on blood-streaked

corridor floors. The dead were covered by sheets and the injured were lying helpless and in anguish on the floors.

Wadhams (2024) revealed that the Israeli minister of defence vowed to wipe out Hamas off the face of the earth completely. He went on to declare that Gaza will be forever transformed and will never look the same. These declarations impacted the lives of the general population of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. In a bid to achieve this, Israel cut off the supply of life-supporting resources such as water supplies, medical supplies, fuel and electricity. The children and the elderly were adversely affected. The volatile antagonism of the military conflict in the Gaza Strip caused worry and anxiety among the Palestinians living in the raided Gaza Strip.

Lazzarini (2024) reports that the health system in the Gaza Strip was on the brink of collapse. Emergence operations were done without enough anaesthetics. Clothes were used as improvised bandages and vinegar as antiseptic. The collapse of the highly demanded and needed essential health services amid the war made the casualties more vulnerable to depressive episodes. The psychological sense of safety became diminished in the war-torn Gaza Strip.

The people of Palestine living in the Gaza Strip experienced inhuman treatment as they were subjected to severe beatings, detention, electric shocks, skin burning by lighters, deprivation of food, sleep and access to bathrooms until they defecated on themselves (UN OCHA, 2024). Guterres (2024) described the situation in the Gaza Strip as catastrophic and on the verge of a humanitarian system collapse. These sentiments depicted the severity of the devastating psycho-physiological conditions experienced by the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip.

The South African Government (2023) filed a petition to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel. The ICJ is the judicial organ of the United Nations. In its application, the South African government accused Israelis of committing genocide against the people of Palestine living in the Gaza Strip. The court validated the arguments of South Africa as having merit and ruled in favour of South Africa. Despite the court ruling, Israel continued with its military campaign against Hamas with disastrous consequences for the people of Palestine living in the Gaza Strip. The hope to end the hostility was lost as the war continued. Efforts to stop the war continued to hit a brick wall. Many lives continued to be lost in a place once called home by many of the people of Palestine. The horrific scenes of war casualties accompanied

by rubbles of destroyed buildings left the people of Palestine living in the Gaza Strip in a state of shock and disbelief.

Background to the conflict

According to Lazzarini (2024), the Palestinians had for a long time viewed Israel as an oppressor who is depriving them of their land and related opportunities. They resisted any form of aggression and occupation of their land. The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip viewed themselves as denied social justice by Israelites whom they perceived as taking away their opportunities and resources. Gaza Strip has an overall unemployment rate of 46% and 70% of the youths are unemployed (UNRWA, 2023). Gaza Strip is bordered by Egypt on the southeast and Israel on the east and north. It is on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is 41km long and 12km wide. Its estimated population is 2 million Palestinians. Its population density is very high.

Gaza Strip is a source of identity among the Palestinians. Gaza Strip was, however, captured and occupied by Israel during the 1967 war. Upon its capture, the Israeli army remained in the Gaza Strip. When the Sunni Islamic Hamas won an election against Fatah in 2006, it began to govern the Gaza Strip. Hamas subsequently was at war against the Israeli army soon after it resumed power in the Gaza Strip. On 7 October 2023, Hamas went on a killing spree of Israeli civilians leaving many dead. According to UNOCHA (2023), over 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals including 33 children were killed by Hamas.

The Hamas attack on Israelis at a music gala on the 7th of October 2023 made the Israeli government declare a fully-fledged war against Hamas. This war led to the horrendous scenes from the Gaza Strip. According to an Aljazeera report (16 August, 2024), more than 40,000 Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip were killed by the Israeli forces. The figure could be higher as other dead bodies were still believed to be buried by the rubble of the destroyed buildings.

Theoretical framework

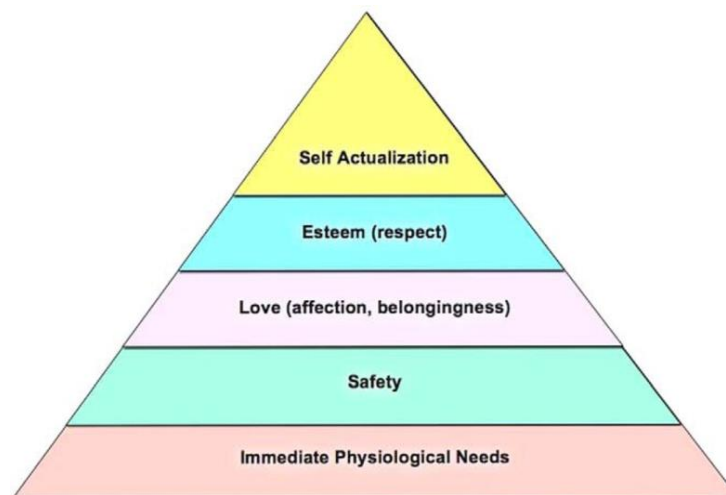


Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs
Adapted from *Pespect Psychol Sci* (2010)

The theoretical framework of the study was drawn from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy consists of a tiered model of human needs. According to Mcleod (2018), the needs are arranged in a hierarchical order whereby the needs at the bottom should be fulfilled first before progressing to the next level. Failure to fulfil the needs at a particular level or stage can jeopardise the progression to the next level. As put across by Maslow (1954), the hierarchical needs are physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualisation.

In the context of the war in Gaza, it became increasingly difficult for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to access physiological needs such as food, water and shelter in a hostile environment. The provision of essential services was blocked by the Israeli army. The sense of safety in a war-torn Gaza Strip was lost. Lives were continuously being lost and the basic infrastructure was reduced to rubbles due to bombardments. The children lost the much-needed parental care and love as their parents were during the conflict. The sense of belonging no longer existed among the Palestinians as the Gaza Strip was being destroyed daily. Conceptually linked to the fourth and fifth levels of self-esteem and self-actualisation, respectively, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip no longer believed in themselves. They had lost the dignity and confidence to achieve their intended personal goals. The individuals' need to realise their full growth potential in terms of achievements had been thwarted by the conflict in the Gaza Strip.

Statement of the problem

The Palestinians living in war torn Gaza Strip were subjected to severe psychological trauma due to the military conflict between Israel and Hamas. To what extent were the people of Palestine able to navigate the psychological sense of safety in the face of hostility in the Gaza Strip?

Aim of the study

The study is aimed at exploring the perceived psychological distress experienced by Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and come out with possible intervention strategies.

Study objectives

- To explore the psychological sense of safety in the face of hostility among the people of Palestine living in the Gaza Strip.
- To identify the psychological distress experienced by the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip.
- To establish intervention strategies to assist the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip to deal with the perceived psychological distress.

Research questions

- How did the war in the Gaza Strip adversely affect the psychological sense of safety among the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip?
- What was the psychological distress experienced by the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip?
- How can the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip be assisted to deal with the perceived psychological distress.

Methodology

The researcher used the documentary analysis method that involved the systematic examination and interpretation of various documents and records from the print and electronic media. This was meant to gain insights of sense of safety among the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip (Bowen, 2009). The documentary analysis gave an insight into the hostile environment in the Gaza Strip. The researcher analysed relevant documents, records and reports of the atrocities committed during the conflict and this affected the people of Palestine living in the Gaza Strip. Classified news from various news channels such as Aljazeera gave comprehensive coverage of the war in the Gaza Strip. Reports from the United Nations (2023), World Health

Organisation (2024) and UNICEF (2023) covering war in the Gaza Strip were analysed. By examining these documents, records and reports, the researchers gained a deeper understanding of the brutal nature of the war in the Gaza Strip and how it adversely affected the psychological well-being of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip.

In order to address the limitations of documentary analysis, strict measures were put in place which included triangulation. This involved cross checking the authenticity and credibility of the documents information through comparing it with other credible sources such as academic articles and media publications. The context in which the documents were created was also considered to ensure they remain relevant and unbiased. The researchers also engaged competent peer reviewers in the field to review selected documents and provide feedback on potential biases.

Discussion

According to the UNRWA (2023) report, an estimated 1.9 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip have been displaced. The situation was so terrible that there was no safe place for the Palestinian civilians living in the Gaza Strip. According to a report presented by Save the Children (2023), a total of 7,729 children in the Gaza Strip have been killed. The Gaza Ministry of Health (2024) report revealed that over 22,000 Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip have been killed and more than 58,000 injured due to Israeli bombardments. According to an Aljazeera report (16 August, 2024), more than 40,000 Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip have been killed. There was no safe place in the Gaza Strip for Palestinians to enjoy mental peace and tranquillity. The sense of safety and security was lost, which culminated in depressive episodes.

The war in the Gaza Strip had adversely affected the mental health of the community members. According to Nemer (2023), people were paranoid about getting attacked. They were experiencing obsessive compulsive disorder characterised by repeated checking on whether the doors and windows were securely closed before going to bed. This was triggered by safety needs. They were uncertain about the future as the war continued. In an attempt to deal with the distress, the individuals ended up resorting to the use of defence mechanisms such as denial to go out of the war-prone Gaza Strip. Zimmer (2024) reiterated that a lot of the individuals were presenting some psychological wounds that would take long to heal. The hostile environment created by the war made it increasingly difficult for the distressed Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to receive much-needed mental health care and support.

Asabeh (2023) posits that the heavy military presence in the Gaza Strip contributed to severe fear accompanied by loss of confidence and self-esteem. The people experienced loss of sleep, anxiety and a negative view of the self and their environment. They viewed their life as meaningless and not worthy living for. In addition, they lost their sense of security as they continued to lose their lives. Their basic physiological needs became scarce and a sense of pessimism emerged as the conditions in the environment were hostile.

In a related report by UNRWA (2024), a total of 72 United Nations aid workers were killed by the Israeli soldiers. A convoy of ambulances was struck by Israeli soldiers as it was ferrying the war casualties. The Israeli army blocked humanitarian aid leaving the Palestinians in Gaza Strip in a state of despair. The United Nations World Food Programme (2024) reported a full-blown famine in the Gaza Strip as a result of the war. Lack of food accompanied by blockage of food aid by the Israeli army resulted in a humanitarian crisis. The people went through emotional pain in the face of starvation. They perceived themselves as suffering without justification. They were victims of circumstances and endured excruciating distress. Their sense of hope was lost as they were denied access to essential services such as food, medication and clean water.

The war in the Gaza Strip disrupted the smooth provision of physiological needs. As reported by Crickx (2024), more than one million children in the Gaza Strip needed essential services. These services included shelter, food, water and medication. The war had cut off the supply of these essential services. The rule of survival in the jungle is premised on the survival of the fittest and resultantly children without surviving skills were more vulnerable to abuse. The traumatic experience of witnessing the brutal nature of war haunted them. They would struggle to deal with the negative thoughts triggered by the incessant war. The much-needed parental love, warmth and care for the children were no longer available. Most of the children's parents were brutally murdered. According to UNICEF (2023) report, 80% of the children were no longer going to school as learning facilities were also targets of bombardment by the Israeli military forces. The children's psychological sense of safety was compromised. Their future looked gloomy without parental care, love and support.

There was wanton destruction of infrastructure including residential buildings, schools and hospitals. Most people were left homeless and more were vulnerable to psychopathology. The BBC (2023, December 5) news report depicted an image of the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City that was reduced to rubble. The mosque was built in the 7th century and was one of the

Palestinians' religious symbols. The mosque was a symbol of hope and support for those mentally distressed. It served as a place where the Palestinians could gather and find solace. They felt a sense of belonging and safety as they shared experiences. According to the UNRWA (2024) report, the Israeli army cited the Qur'an passage referring to the floods of Noah's era that destroyed the wrongdoers as a justification for supporting the massacre of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip whom they perceived as wrongdoers. The Center for Victims of Torture (2023) described the war in the Gaza Strip as carnage. This was due to the horrific and destructive nature of the war which resulted in the massive deaths of both old and young people in the Gaza Strip. The people were mentally afflicted as they witnessed the demise of their close relatives. They were mentally disoriented and prone to psychiatric disorders characterised by disorganised behaviour and thinking patterns.

The psychological sense of safety and belonging among the Palestinians lessened due to continuous military incursions by the Israeli army seeking to destroy Hamas leadership and militants living in the Gaza Strip. The state of confusion heightened accompanied by role confusion. Daily routines became unpredictable and culminated into anxiety and uncertainties. The family structure became fragmented as lives were lost due to the daily bombardments. Chaotic and horrific scenes were experienced as rubbles of destroyed buildings piled on the ground. Most residents of the Gaza Strip were vulnerable to diseases as all their social amenities had ceased to function. Terrifying and horrific scenes of casualties of war were crying for help as captured by vivid media images. The injured could hardly get the much-needed life-saving help. The children could not mentally bear the trauma they were subjected to during the conflict. The children were mentally devastated by witnessing the brutalities perpetrated against their parents.

According to a UN (2024) report, a total of 2.2 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip were exposed to squalid conditions. The situation was so horrible that all efforts to deliver aid were curtailed by the Israeli army. The basic needs for survival such as food, drinkable water and shelter were scarce. The residents were susceptible to high levels of stress, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. The sense of optimism was lost as there was no safe ground in the Gaza Strip for the people of Palestine. It was traumatising for the Palestinians living in Gaza Strip to experience the horrific deaths of their close relatives and the destruction of infrastructure. They were cornered and had nowhere to take refuge. Some defenceless civilians became the targets of Israeli soldiers. Dubow (2024) reveals that the war-prone Gaza Strip residents were susceptible to nightmares and intrusive frightening thoughts. These were

accompanied by depressive episodes as their normal sleeping patterns were disrupted due to hyper-vigilance. The severity of the pain experienced by the residents of Gaza was described by Baghdadi (2024) as open wounds which were continuously bleeding. The distress got worse each day in the absence of bio-psychosocial support. Cognitively, the pain was appraised as insurmountable and rendered the Gaza Strip residents in a mental state of helplessness.

In the context of their culture, the Palestinian children perceived their parents as the source of support and protection. The parents had an obligation to protect their children against any form of harm, but this was no longer possible in the face of the vengeful Israeli army. According to Freud (1945), a lack of parental care and protection prompts the development of an aggressive and anti-social personality in later adulthood life. Huesmann (2024) reiterated that kids exposed to war environments were likely to be aggressive and intolerant in adulthood life. They cognitively encoded scripts of violence which will influence later personality life.

Daskal (2023) put across that first-degree relatives of the children were killed as the war rages on. The children lost their parents, brothers and sisters. The traumatic experiences made them vulnerable to shock, emotional anguish and sadness. They struggled to come in terms with the reality of war and its adverse consequences.

The incurred losses triggered grief among the Gaza Strip inhabitants. Moments of sadness and sorrow engulfed the Gaza Strip community members. The past good days of success stories were suddenly shattered as most of their properties they had lived and worked for were suddenly destroyed within a short space of time. They had no place they could call home. Whitehouse and Swann (2023) describe the Gaza Strip as in a state of fragmentation and without functional systems. The residents' sense of self-identity was lost as they experienced cognitive dissonance. Their daily routines and schedules became unpredictable. Their normal thinking and behaviour patterns were disoriented. Emotions were taking precedence over logic. The uncontrolled expression of emotions served as a way of releasing painful feelings. The Israeli soldiers were accused of exercising extremism and indiscriminately killing of civilians including children, women and the elderly in the Gaza Strip without any sense of remorse.

The war in the Gaza Strip caused massive and discriminatory loss of innocent lives. Strozier (2024) concurs that war is brutal and does not conform to Islam's principles of mercy, leniency and compassion. The residents were subjected to continuous fear and loss of hope as they felt trapped and had nowhere to seek refuge. They saw themselves as animals waiting to be

slaughtered by the Israeli military. The much-needed help to save lives was taking longer to come, despite the international world calling for cessation of hostility in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip were in a state of despair as they failed to come to terms with the military conflict they were subjected to (Fromm, 2024). They remained in a state of shock as bombardments were a common occurrence. They could hardly hope to survive in such life-threatening war zone. The sense of safety tended to fade away as the intensity of war got stronger each day. More war casualties were recorded daily.

Mizrahi (2024) reports that Gaza Strip was consistently bombed posing a great threat to the life of members of the community. They were continually in a fright mode culminating in acute panic attacks. The hyper-vigilant mentality contributed to cognitive dissonance among the residents of the Gaza Strip. Geva (2023) describes frightening images of victims of war and related stories on social media that adversely affected the psychological well-being of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. The images were so horrible that they caused severe distress, especially to those with a nervous disposition.

The deep rooted grief among the Gaza Strip Palestinians made them angry, but without the means to manage the situation. The Palestinians regarded themselves as having common challenges, which led them to strengthen each other in the event of a catastrophe. Coping with stress became difficult as lives were continuously lost without any prospects of bright future ahead of them. It increasingly became difficult to move forward with life in a hostile environment. The people became preoccupied with the thoughts of their fate. The massive displacement of the community members rendered them homeless and thereby confined in refugee camps that had inadequate basic needs supplies such as water and food. The inhabitants were vulnerable to chronic mental and physical ailments due to horrific experiences. Such pain and grief could last for a long time as these are deep-rooted experiences.

Psychological interventions to assist the Gaza Strip inhabitants in dealing with their distress included the use of art therapy. The individuals were encouraged to express their feelings in the form of art. The themes and meaning of the drawn pictures were then collectively discussed. The painful emotions were expressed in the form of drawn and painted pictures. The drawn pictures depicted stories of atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli soldiers. The art therapy was used in collaboration with other techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy. Positive thinking and talking were encouraged among the individuals. The sense of optimism kept on

providing hope to the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. The civilians remained hopeful that the hostile situation was not permanent, but would change for the better.

The painful memories of witnessing the horrific deaths of their close family members haunted them. In an attempt to assist the children and the elderly to deal with the distress, they were encouraged to talk about their painful feelings (Hanna, 2023). Songs and dances of solidarity were also used as a way of releasing painful emotions. According to Geva (2023), children should be taught to cherish the values of tolerance and inclusion. This could help in future to build a better world whereby people of different nationalities can live in peace with each other. In a bid to rescue the catastrophic mental health conditions, Zimmer (2024) reports that free healthcare for women and children was put in place. This was meant to caution those who could not afford to pay for mental health services.

It is however important to note that it became increasingly difficult to provide psycho-social support to all the distressed community members due to limited resources and mental health infrastructure. There was a critical shortage of social workers exacerbated by uncertainties as to when the war would end. Similar sentiments were echoed by Nemer (2024) who asserted that there are limited psycho-social supports for victims of war. This entails that the majority of victims were unattended to and thus vulnerable to severe mental distress. Asi (2024) concluded that, “There are limited tools and frameworks to screen PTSD among the victims of war”. Mental health programmes remained unattended despite the continuous traumatic exposure to the military conflict by the Gaza inhabitants.

There were various limitations of the study as the research relied on documentary analysis whereby the findings may not be generalised beyond the specific context of the Gaza Strip. The interpretation of documents can be subjective, and different researchers may draw varying conclusions from the same material. There was also a lack of direct interaction with the participants, which limited the comprehensive collection of research data. Irrespective of the acknowledged limitations, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of the psychological well-being of individuals in a conflict zone, highlighting specific challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

Ordinary Palestinians and Israelis have been subjected to continuous distress, which is a result of exposure to violent conflicts and trauma caused by endless military conflicts in the Middle East. The children and women bear the brunt of the horrific conditions as many die in very violent circumstances. The worsening socio-economic conditions in Palestine, particularly for those in the Gaza Strip, exacerbate the unbearable conditions that Palestinians face in their conflicts with the Israelis. These conflicts have destroyed and imperilled the mental and physical health of the vulnerable groups in both Palestine and Israel. The distress caused by wars has the effect of shaking the foundation of children's' current and future psychological, emotional, and cognitive development. Such disturbances have implications for their self-concept and relationships with others. The effects of the recent military conflict may have traumatic effects for generations to come. There is therefore an urgent need to provide policies that prioritise dialogue as a tool of conflict resolution, thereby promoting communication between the Palestinians and the Israelites. This could help to restore peace, trust and stability. The policies should also focus on rebuilding community structures and restoring the social fabric to facilitate recovery and resilience.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, this study recommends a consensual and robust resolution of conflict through dialogue as a way to restore the psychological well-being of the people and to prevent further loss of life, especially among defenceless children and women. There is a need to establish a truly multilateral peace agenda involving key regional players. The research further recommends the establishment of facilities that offer free healthcare for women and children at a much greater scale. The war has ravaged not only the Hamas political and military nerve system, but has also led to the collapse of the Palestinian social fabric and other social services such as the health care system. It is important to establish a psycho-social support centre to assist traumatised and distressed victims of war. There is also a need to ensure the availability of physiological needs such as food, shelter and medication to those confronted by war.

Future studies

Future research should focus on the effectiveness of community driven mental health intervention strategies for resilience building among the children and women in war torn areas.

Any future research may highly contributions to a deeper understanding of the mental health needs in conflict zones, ultimately proffering guiding intervention strategies.

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